

Physical Activity & Nutrition School Health Trends¹



Fact Sheet

Trends

- Parents, principals, superintendents and school board members all agree that something should be done about the looming crisis in the health of Utah's school-aged population. **And, they see a clear link between academic performance, student behavior and diet and exercise. But no one seems to want to take the lead in making policy changes.**
- On school health policies, **most parents want more from schools; schools want more from parents.**

"Nutrition and fitness are taught in health classes, but then kids see snack foods in vending machines, fast food in the lunch line and poor family habits." (rural parent)

"Kids need to be taught about nutrition and P.E. in school, but it's ultimately the parents' responsibility." (school board member)

- **Rural parents and parents of elementary school children are most concerned about school health issues.**
- **Many administrators refuse to take responsibility for health policies in their schools.** They say the responsibility lies with parents and that schools simply cannot focus on health issues with lack of funding and federal and state mandates, such as end-of-level testing.

"Schools should play a SECONDARY role in health. We don't have the time, and we're focused on testing." (superintendent)

Coordinated School Health

- **55% of parents place health concerns at or near the top of their priorities for schools, compared to only 37% of school administrators.**
- When asked to describe the ideal school health policy, all groups indicated that **a coordinated effort is needed to educate parents and teachers about why nutrition and physical activity are important.**



¹ Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Health Promotion, Cardiovascular Health Program. (2003). Focus groups conducted in November and December of 2002 in Salt Lake City, UT. Sample included parents of school-age children, principals, superintendents, and school board members from rural and urban areas across the state.

School Health Trends continued

Funding for P.E. Specialists

- **Parents and administrators agree that physical activity is sorely lacking in Utah schools.** The majority of parents supported mandatory daily physical activity in classrooms supervised by a certified P.E. specialist. **61% of parents are in support of districts allocating more monies to hire P.E. specialists.**

“[Kids] get PE in elementary, then NONE in middle school.” (rural parent)

- 100% of urban administrators agree that school districts should provide funding for P.E. specialists. However, **no rural school boards supported additional monies for P.E. teachers, saying simply: “We just don’t have the money.”**

Vending Machines

- Two formidable arguments support vending machines in secondary schools: **(1) the significant revenue stream generated** and **(2) the importance of local control and decision making.**

“Until the Legislature is willing to fund us, I’ve got vending machines in my school and I’m not willing to take them out.” (urban principal)

- One urban high school principal admitted that his school received **\$275,000 for signing an exclusive 10-year contract with Pepsi, plus an additional \$35,000 – 40,000 per year in sales.**

“It’s not about money. Kids will leave campus and go to the mini-mart to get junk food, and that’s unsafe.” (superintendent)

- **4 out of 10 elementary urban principals have been approached recently about installing vending machines in their schools.**

“Junk food is part of our culture. You can’t take Coke and Pepsi away.” (superintendent)

- Parental opinion often runs counter to those of administrators. **83% of parents favor limiting or eliminating junk food in vending machines.**

“It’s [kids’] choice. They should be smart enough to eat nutritious food.” (urban parent)

“Teen girls are very conflicted. They’re exposed to pizza and soda at school and home, then to magazines that depict skinny models. They end up just not eating at all.” (rural parent)